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FOR NEA/ARP AMACDONALD AND INR JYAPHE

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SUBJECT: SA'ADA CEASEFIRE TALKS "SHATTERED"

REF: A. SANAA 2117
[1](#)B. SANAA 2155

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (S/NF) SUMMARY. A knowledgeable insider reported that the incipient Sa'ada ceasefire discussions have been "shattered." Just days earlier, presidential advisors Abdul Karim al-Iryani and Mohammed Azzan told EmbOffs that Saleh was willing to consider a political solution to the war in Sa'ada. Both advisors stressed that the mediation commission must include neutral civilians and a strong external actor. Political analyst Murad Zafir believes that Saleh's recent discussions with the Houthis' mediator were merely attempts to gauge the rebels' appetite for continuing the war. Zafir argues that Saleh will have little reason to end the ROYG's military campaign in the north as long as he continues to receive funding and military support for the war from the SAG. END SUMMARY.

CEASEFIRE COMMISSION "SHATTERED"...

[1](#)2. (S/NF) Murad Zafir, Deputy Director of the National Democratic Institute, informed PolOff that President Saleh "shattered" prospects for a mediation commission on December [1](#)6. Zafir told PolOff on December 8 that Saleh reportedly insulted Houthi mediator Hassan Zaid, accusing him of being a Houthi pawn who got involved in the ceasefire discussions to "shield" the rebels. Saleh reportedly told Zaid that the Houthis were going to surrender in a matter of days. (Note: PolOff was unable to meet with Zaid to confirm these reports. End Note.)

[1](#)3. (S/NF) Zafir speculated that Saleh's recent meetings with Zaid (refs a and b) were "cunning attempts at information-gathering, not negotiation," in order to gauge the Houthis' appetite for continuing the war. "For Saleh, the sixth war has to be the last war, no matter what the cost," he said, arguing that the war will continue as long as Saleh can use SAG resources to fight it. Regarding the prospects for a ceasefire, Zafir said, "I have no hope. Saleh thinks he has the upper hand now."

...BUT SALEH SEEMED SERIOUS

[1](#)4. (S/NF) Just days earlier, presidential advisors Abdul Karim al-Iryani and Mohammed Azzan told EmbOffs that they believed Saleh was willing to consider a political solution to the war in Sa'ada. Iryani told EconOff on December 4 that he thought Saleh was serious about pursuing a ceasefire and that it was a positive signal that the Houthis had accepted the ROYG's five ceasefire conditions (ref a). He did not

think Saleh was using the ceasefire discussions to buy time, although he conceded that the military leadership could be doing so. Azzan, presidential advisor for Sa'ada affairs, told PolOff on December 7 that Saleh is "looking for an acceptable solution" which would allow him to save face while not encouraging others to challenge his authority. He believed that "both sides are now tired of fighting," and thought both would accept a strong offer of mediation.

NEUTRAL MEDIATORS NEEDED

15. (S/NF) Both advisors, however, stressed the importance of the mediation commission's composition, arguing that it must include neutral civilians and a strong external actor. (Note: Azzan told PolOff on December 5 that he was not aware of any current effort to negotiate a ceasefire or to form a new mediation commission. End Note.) Iryani lamented the lack of civilian membership on the mediation commission, stating that it consisted only of representatives from the military and the Houthis. (Note: Houthi mediator Zaid told PolOff on December 2 that the President had invited three civilians to participate in the commission, including himself (ref b). End Note.) Iryani said the lack of an external mediator was also a problem, noting the absence of Western or inter-governmental participants as an impediment to a solution. In Azzan's opinion, the biggest lesson learned from the previous attempt at mediation, led by the Qataris in 2007-2008, is that neutral third parties need to be involved. He noted how difficult it is to create a commission that is perceived as neutral by the warring parties, and he noted that the ROYG is loath to create a truly neutral one: "The government forms the commission, and the government wants its way with it," he said. He does not believe that the opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) should be involved, since it may try to use the mediation process to weaken the ROYG. (Note: Zaid is the secretary general of the Haqq party and the current chair of the JMP. End Note.) Azzan also believes that external involvement in mediation would be helpful, "but it has to be behind the scenes, not public," to allow the ROYG to save face. Azzan did not offer suggestions of which neutral individuals or external actors should be considered, but he said that Saleh needs to feel assured that they have no hidden agenda against him.

SALEH DEEPLY INVOLVED IN MILITARY CAMPAIGN

16. (S/NF) Zafir told PolOff that in early November, Saleh established a military operations center in the presidential palace from which he is directing the war. According to Zafir, "Saleh is (now) personally leading the whole military campaign," a point Azzan seemed to make when he mentioned his regular conversations with Saleh about the prosecution of the war. In relocating the command center to the presidential palace, Saleh reportedly gutted the operations center under the control of MG Ali Muhsin. For this and other reasons, Zafir says that the "internal motives" for launching the war)- to weaken Muhsin, seen as the main obstacle between Saleh's son Ahmed Ali and the presidency once Saleh leaves office (ref b) -) have been resolved. Saudi involvement is what continues to drive it now, he said.

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